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SUBJECT: H1N1 UPDATE: NORWAY PREPRES FOR WAVE OF PANDEMIC
FLU CASES

¶1. (U) Summary: H1N1 cases in Norway have increased to 342 confirmed cases as of the end of July, and the infection rate appears to be accelerating, driven largely by the return of Norwegians from summer holidays abroad. Norwegian health officials recently announced plans to deal with the pandemic, such as preparing the Ministry of Defense's Medical Corps and other health sector employees to assist if health care providers are overwhelmed, distributing posters to schools and universities on proper hand-washing and coughing etiquette, and fast-tracking the vaccine approval process in accordance with the European Medical Agency protocol. Contingency plans have even been prepared in case large numbers of election workers or voters are incapacitated during Norway's upcoming general elections on September 14. As of July 28, district-level health officials are required to notify the Norwegian Public Health Institute (FHI) when planning public gatherings such as festivals, concerts, and sporting events. H1N1 infections at an H4 youth conference over the past weekend led to the Norwegian authorities to cancel the event; however, Norway's Cup, the world's largest youth soccer competition, continues, with only one H1N1 diagnosis to date. End Summary.

H1N1 Cases in Norway now up to 342

¶2. (U) H1N1 cases in Norway surged to 294 confirmed cases in mid-July and 342 by the end of July; health officials note the rate of infections appears to be accelerating rapidly. According to the Norwegian Surveillance System for Communicable Diseases (www.msis.no), the number of infections doubled since last week, and doubled again within the past few days, with 68% of infections occurring in people younger than 30 years old. Norwegian government authorities said July 27 that H1N1 is now moving "freely" in Norway, i.e. Norwegians can become infected without traveling abroad and without exposure to someone confirmed to be an H1N1 carrier. An Oslo Casualty Clinic employee said July 15 that the clinic had been filled to capacity, as even those with mild symptoms were coming in to be tested. FHI is now encouraging people to stay at home instead of coming in to clinics, if they have no serious complications, and to contact their general practitioners if they have flu-like symptoms.

¶3. (U) In a July 24 news conference, Norway's Minister of Health and Care Services Bjarne Haakon Hanssen said the number of confirmed cases does not reflect actual numbers of infected individuals in Norway, as many who fall ill are not being tested. Hanssen said that three hospitalized, critically ill H1N1 patients are of the greatest concern, with only one starting to show signs of recovery. At the same July 24 press conference, Norwegian Health Director Bjorn Inge Larsen said a large wave of new cases could occur this Fall. He warned that although Norwegian health authorities were making preparations, many Norwegians would become seriously ill and some deaths were to be expected. He said the situation in the UK serves as a bellwether for Norway, and will help guide Norwegian officials as they determine, for example, if they need to purchase additional respirators or other supplies.

Preparations Underway...

¶4. (U) Hanssen announced that the Ministry of Defense's Medical Corps has been asked to review its capability to assist if regular health workers are overwhelmed by demand, adding that medical students and health sector employees could be mobilized if necessary when the pandemic hits hardest. He also said the Norwegian government would distribute 80,000 posters to schools and universities on hand-washing and coughing etiquette before the third week of August, when schools go back into session.

¶5. (U) Norway has ordered 9.4 million doses of anti-flu (H1N1) vaccine from GlaxoSmithKline, which the government says should be sufficient to cover Norway's entire population of 4.5 million people (two doses are required per person.)

Larsen said that Norway will follow the European Medicines Agency protocol to fast-track the review of data from vaccine manufacturers, so that vaccinations can start as early as

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September. He noted that initially, only vulnerable population members -- such as pregnant women, people with underlying conditions, and health care workers -- would be vaccinated. Norway has set up a website, www.pandemi.no, and a hotline number, 47 800 87 150, to be activated August 3.

¶6. (U) The Confederation of Norwegian Businesses and Industry spokeswoman Bjarne Soerhus told businesses July 20 to expect high levels of sick leave this fall, and urged them to develop contingency plans. Information Director for Norway's largest oil company, StatoilHydro, Ola Morten Aanestad, commented July 20 that since the diagnosis of a London-based employee, the company was very concerned with preventing infection at other work sites, including off-shore oil and gas installations.

Flu's Impact on Current and Upcoming Events

¶7. (U) FHI announced July 28 that district-level health officials must contact FHI "in good time" before festivals, concerts, sporting events and other large gatherings are scheduled, to ensure event organizers are prepared for a potential outbreak. FHI has also expressed concern that Norway's general election on September 14 may be affected if key election workers fall ill. In response, Local Government and Regional Development Minister Magnhild Meltvedt Kleppa has instructed local authorities to prepare contingency plans. These could include having back-up teams and setting up voting booths in hospitals, if necessary. Other events under the spotlight include the ongoing July 26 - August 1 Norway Cup, the largest international youth soccer competition in the world, with about 30,000 participants from 53 countries. A Kenyan player was diagnosed with H1N1 July 27, and four others are under observation; however, it is unlikely the event will be canceled. Norwegian authorities did, however, cancel on July 27 an international 4H youth camp, as several participants fell ill with H1N1 infections.

¶8. (U) Post will continue to monitor the rate of new infections. Meanwhile, the Embassy continues to engage with Norwegian health authorities to ensure Embassy American and local staff are included in the government's planned distribution of H1N1 vaccines once those become available.

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